

**“You Want Community Buy-In?  
We’ll Get You Community Buy-in!”**

*Here are Nine Best Practices of Sponsoring Organizations that  
have Experienced Successful Community Participation.*



**AN ACTION LEARNING CHALLENGE PROJECT**

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## Introduction

For more than 45 years, VISTA members have been serving communities throughout America.

We've served communities from the heart of the Appalachians to the heart of our nation's largest metropolitan centers, and thousands of cities, suburbs and rural towns in between!

These VISTAs are dedicated individuals who have brought their compassionate, hard-working and self-starting attributes to these communities, with the aim of building a better tomorrow.

However, change of this sort and this magnitude, does not come overnight and cannot be achieved by one person. The work a VISTA member achieves comes from partnerships forged throughout a year of service within the community. Without partnerships with community stakeholders, VISTAs goal will fall upon deaf ears, and the prospects of success diminish.

Considering that each VISTA member has only 365 days to complete what sometimes seems like the equivalent of moving mountains, it is vitally important for these new servants to have the tools needed to hit the ground running, from the very start. This success comes from a supportive and informed local community, which is community buy-in!

During the past few months this action learning team, assembled of VISTA leaders from across the nation, serving in each of the four time zones, has examined just how we can improve each VISTA members likelihood of achieving buy-in from the communities they serve. The following presentation is our recommendations for achieving community buy-in, based upon interviews conducted with successful VISTA projects throughout the nation.

We wish to thank the following VISTA projects for their much appreciated help and willingness to share their methods of successful community buy-in: The Greater Homewood Community Corporation, Boulder County Care Connect, Think Tank, SGCM, The Maine Commission for Community Service, RurAL Cap, The Wings Of Eagles Ranch, Tulane University VISTA Project, Ohio Association of Second Harvest Food Banks, Iowa Council of Foundations and Shining Hope Farms.

We also want to thank each and every AmeriCorps VISTA member serving throughout our country. Your service is making this country a better place, one community at a time!

## Best Practice # 1:

### It starts with the community!

Many sponsoring organizations find success when community feedback guides their application to the Corporation for National and Community Service. This is done when the community in which the VISTA will be working is given an opportunity to participate in the project proposal or selection process. Community members' input and participation will increase awareness of the VISTA project, and their insight will ensure the VISTA's work addresses the most pressing needs.

#### Recommendations

\*Encourage community members to participate in the VISTA project proposal process, working together to brainstorm ideas that directly address their identified needs



The community leaders are directly involved in the project creation and so they are very aware of the VISTA projects.

-Corporación del Proyecto ENLACE del Caño Martín Peña in Puerto Rico

\*For intermediary sponsor sites, include a representative from the community on a project proposal review committee when determining which VISTA projects to fund



Greater Homewood Community Corporation, an intermediary site located in Baltimore, Maryland recruits up to four individuals to serve on their project proposal review committee. Of those recruited, they make sure to include at least one representative from the community in which the projects will be enacted.

\*Invite representatives from the community to sit in on interviews with VISTA candidates and offer their opinions



Corporación del Proyecto ENLACE del Caño Martín Peña in Puerto Rico asks community members to participate in VISTA interviews to ensure the community has a say in which candidate is selected.

## Best Practice # 2:

### Spread the word!

Conducting outreach to organizations and members in the community ensures an awareness and understanding of the AmeriCorps\*VISTA program as a whole, and the role that each sponsoring organization and host site has within the VISTA project. Successful VISTA placement sites provide this outreach and education through participation at relevant community events and through presentations given by staff members and/or VISTA member(s) serving with the host site.

#### Recommendations

\*Give a presentation about AmeriCorps to college students, service organizations, or local residents to increase awareness of AmeriCorps and the work VISTAs do in the community



The VISTA Leader at the SGSM Network in Missouri is instrumental in educating the community about the AmeriCorps VISTA program. Outreach is done to explain how VISTAs have helped SGSM and their partner agencies grow.

\*Have supervisors, board members, or agency representatives introduce the VISTA at relevant community events



The Iowa Council of Foundations asks staff members at the organization to bring the VISTA along to meetings and events and introduce them to local community leaders.

\*Have an AmeriCorps table at career fairs, service fairs, and other such events to encourage individuals to work for or partner with the VISTA program on projects important to the community



Margaret (Program Director) and the VISTA members at Prescott College set monthly outreach goals. They do the necessary outreach by showing up at community events that matter - like recovery fairs, job fairs, and the county fair.

## Best Practice # 3:

Be Proud to be an AmeriCorps member!

Many successful VISTA placement sites utilize the VISTA logo to increase awareness of the program. Consider including it on handouts and materials to help the community more clearly associate the project with AmeriCorps VISTA.

### Recommendations

\*Add the AmeriCorps logo to flyers



The Ohio Food Bank puts the AmeriCorps logo on all of their documents.

\*Include the AmeriCorps logo on your organization's website



At the Maine Commission for Community Service, they request all host sites to have AmeriCorps branding on their website.

\*Ask the VISTA to wear their AmeriCorps gear when out in the community



At the Maine Commission for Community Service, they request all host sites to have AmeriCorps branding on their website.

### Resources

Find AmeriCorps\*VISTA logos at [http://www.americorps.gov/about/media\\_kit/logos.asp](http://www.americorps.gov/about/media_kit/logos.asp).



## Best Practice # 4:

### Introductions are Only Polite!

Many successful VISTA placement sites have strategies in place to introduce their members into their community, and to relevant community groups.

#### Recommendations

\* **The Buddy System:** Try pairing the VISTA with a mentor from the organization. The mentor would ease the transition by arranging introductions between the VISTA and community members.



At ENLACE, VISTAs are paired with a staff mentor, who facilitates introductions with significant community members.

\* **Thrill of Victory:** Scavenger hunts centering on the organization can be a fun, less-stressful way to start at their project.



During their on-site orientation training, new VISTAs at Think Tank are given a scavenger hunt that includes an interview with the organization's Guiding Coalition chair.

\* **The Written Word:** Many programs have staff or a VISTA member who sends mass e-mails to donors, community partners, and volunteers. These staff also send press releases to local newspapers and media outlets. Some programs even provide sample templates for the VISTA to write press releases for their program or project.



Wings of Eagles Ranch sent out a mass e-mail to 1,600 volunteers, donors, and community members to introduce the VISTA and the mission of AmeriCorps. The Ohio Food Bank regularly writes letters to the editors of newspapers, and trains VISTA members in writing press releases for local TV, newspapers, and radio. Their VISTA sites all have press release templates. The program routinely has representatives meet with the editorial board of newspapers.

## Best Practice # 5: Give Them Guidance!

Throwing someone in the deep end right away is just rude! Practices to help VISTAs get their feet wet in their new role in the community could engage the member and the population they serve.

### Recommendations

\*Local Flavor: Introduce them to notable events/landmarks around town so they feel welcome in and knowledgeable of their new community.



Prescott College's program acclimates VISTAs to the community's attractions, culture, and "quirks" to help them better interact with the community.

\*Become a Shadow: VISTA members can shadow relevant staff first, so they learn the practices of the organization.



At Shining Hope Farms, VISTAs shadow staff so they feel comfortable. Boulder County CareConnect has a supervisor and another staff member looking out for the VISTA. At Think Tank, VISTAs have a staff member as a partner for the first 90 days, and scheduled lunches with different members of the staff.

\* Specialized Training: Many programs have intensive, regular, and specific training for their project, on topics such as media skills, public relations, grant writing, volunteer management, technology, senior care, and cultural competency.



Tulane University trains their members in social and cultural competency, and provides training in open-mind skill sets and teaches them the appropriate questions to ask in their community.

## Best Practice # 6:

### Success, Defined

Successful buy-in from the community has different meanings for different organizations -but there is common ground

#### Recommendations

\*Look at the Math: Several organizations use data and performance measures to track the number of volunteers, donors, and donations to determine community buy-in.

These can be gathered from sources such as:

- \*the VISTA's reports,
- \*volunteer meetings and events, \*government statistics,
- \*internal organization numbers,
- \*data from public resources, like the Chamber of Commerce.



The Iowa Council of Foundations utilizes data and performance measures; Ohio Food Bank checks data from social services, public benefits, and tax assistance agencies to better streamline their response to the community's needs.

#### \* All Aboard



Buy-in is a success when your target community is on board with your project. When the pastors, tribal council, partner families, or campus accepts the VISTA as part of their mission, and the VISTA is known and recognized by the community, buy-in is on its way.

#### \*Being Held Accountable: When the Community Feels Comfortable



When the population you serve trusts you enough to give honest feedback along with their support, and tries to keep everyone on the right track, that is a start to community buy-in.

## Best Practice # 7:

### Introducing Zen – Finding Balance & Intention

Every community's interaction with a VISTA project is different; no blanket introduction will work for all projects, but neither will overwhelming the VISTA with all of the community's idiosyncrasies - it's about finding a balanced and intentional introduction to the specific community. And don't forget site supervisors. When working with a multi-site project, site supervisors often need an introduction to VISTA as well.

#### Recommendations

##### \*Educate and Support Site Supervisors



Make sure the site supervisors buy into the project, understand their role and where to find resources such as the Supervisor handbook on the VISTA Campus.



Have supervisors prepare an overarching, brief project for the VISTA to work on in his/her first few weeks - this encourages the VISTA to dive in right away on something that feels manageable and that they can accomplish.

##### \*Find a Balance!



Don't overwhelm the VISTA with tons of information - each day of orientation should be a balance of information presented to them and self-led discovery by them. Too much hand-holding creates dependence!



The VISTA's orientation should be tailored to their work, and who they will be interacting with.

##### \*Tailor Your VISTA's Introduction to the Community



With the social service sector, everyone ends up wanting a VISTA so you have to be clear about who they are and what they are there to do. Tailor your VISTA's Introduction to the Community.



With the business sector, VISTAs risk not being taken as seriously as an employee. This can be mitigated with a thoughtful introduction by supervisors, mentors, and/or board members.



Don't forget to include social/cultural competency trainings that emphasize the skills the VISTA will need in that particular community. Tulane builds greater social/cultural competency in their VISTA members with on-the-job learning, providing historical context, and/or interaction with community members.

## Resources

You can find the VISTA Supervisors Handbook at

<http://vistacampus.org/mod/book/view.php?id=2223>

## Best Practice # 8: Sustainability=Success!

The goal of all VISTA projects is to expand, and sustain, the capacity of the organizations VISTA serves long after the project is over. Focusing on sustainability from the day the VISTA arrives ensures the community knows the buy-in they invest with the VISTA member will have positive outcomes for years to come.

### Recommendations

#### \*Communication

- Make sure the VISTA has regular check-ins with his/her supervisor, VISTA Leader, or mentor. This will ensure that the VISTA feels supported in his/her work and that potential issues can be caught early.
- Consider using a management tool to help the VISTA track relationships and contacts they create.



SGSM stressed the importance of having the VISTA supervisor serve as a mentor.



Prescott College uses a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) program like Salesforce or Capterra to keep a database of contacts. It is also helpful to create a message board or drop box where files, presentations, tip sheets and information can be saved and referenced.

#### \*Passion

- Make sure to focus on your VISTA member's strengths and engagement will happen naturally! When a VISTA is utilizing their strengths and passions, they are much more likely to be successful in their projects and in their relationships.



The VISTA Leaders training team recommended Strengths Finder 2.0 as a great resource for determining natural strengths.

#### \*Legacy

- Make sure the VISTA members have their own systems in place to maintain the relationships they make with community partners.

- Encourage the VISTA to create a legacy portfolio that can be passed onto his/her successor. This ensures that work isn't duplicated and that the new VISTA can gain context to know where to go next.



Prescott College has found success creating a portfolio of helpful tips, resources, presentations and other articles from the VISTA year to pass down for the duration of the project. This is also useful for tracking outcomes.

## Best Practice # 9:

### 10 Habits of Highly Effective VISTA Projects

We asked all of the organizations we interviewed for their top three tips for ensuring community buy-in; these are the highlights of what they said.

#### Recommendations

- \* Respond to the community's agenda.
- \* Don't just have meetings, have meetings with the right people.
- \* Trainings centering on humility and empathy can be incredibly beneficial for VISTAs new to the community. These trainings teach them how to observe and listen so the VISTA member does not jump in right away without assessing the situation.
- \* Treat VISTAs as though they are staff and work with them with a high degree of professionalism.
- \* Allowing the VISTA to Adjust. Sponsoring organizations should do what they can to facilitate the VISTA's transition into the community with existing partnerships and relationships so time isn't lost building relationships from scratch.
- \* Allowing Visible Service. Consider partnering with other National Service programs and participating in events such as AmeriCorps Week and Martin Luther King Day of Service. VISTAs are not allowed to perform direct service, so sometimes the benefits of their work are not as readily apparent.
- \* Allow the VISTA to own a project; this helps combat the stigma of VISTAs only being volunteers.
- \* Organization Familiarity. Sponsoring organizations should do what they can to ensure the VISTA understands the practices and guidelines of their organization, including their staff, the relationship with the community, and any partnerships they may have.
- \* Have good screening processes - find the right members who will be accountable. Don't just have meetings, have meetings with the right people.

- \* For some programs, VISTAs have uniforms they wear in the community, inspired by CityYear. This prompts conversation around their project and puts national service in the forefront.

## Conclusion

### **SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY BUY-IN!**

This tool that we have created can be a useful resource for sites new to the AmeriCorps program to help them get started on the right foot by putting best practices in place. It can also be a useful tool for more experienced sites as a way of suggesting additional ways for them to further promote VISTA projects in their community. We hope that by implementing any combination of these best practices there will be greater opportunities for collaboration with and participation from the community. In this way VISTAs will be more effective in their projects as a result of this increased community buy-in and support for their work. This will enable VISTAs to continue finding success, doing good for communities all over the United States.



You can read the full text of our interviews at the link below:

<http://bit.ly/SummerActionLearningTeamDoc>.